Bergen Assembly

ACTUALLY, THE DEAD ARE NOT DEAD – BERGEN ASSEMBLY 2019
5.9.–10.11.2019, OPENING DAYS 5.–8.9.2019

INTRODUCTION

Hans D. Christ and Iris Dressler, the artistic directors or conveners of the upcoming Bergen Assembly, have invited ten artists, curators, theorists and activists to form with them a core group that develops the contents and formats of the Bergen Assembly 2019 in a collective process: Murat Deha Boduroğlu, Banu Cennetoğlu, María García, Hiwa K, Katia Krupennikova, Viktor Neumann, Paul B. Preciado, Pedro G. Romero, Simon Sheikh, and Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa. The members of the core group conceive the programme in the form of individual, shared and overlapping projects to which further artists and contributors from other fields will be invited.

Bergen Assembly originates from a critical approach to the biennial format. The point of departure for the core group's joint work towards the 2019 edition is the concept *assembly* itself, which is critically examined both in terms of its political dimensions—as situated between hierarchy and participation—and with respect to aesthetic practices. What does it mean when a biennial (or in this case a triennial) is called an assembly? What expectations of art and the curators does this articulate? The focus is on the general frameworks and techniques of collective political or emancipatory action—and the questions *how*, *in what form*, and *with whom* we intend to develop and shape these practices in the context of an art project.

Out of the discussion process three positions regarding the assembly, or the relationship between art and political action, have crystallised: the parody of political institutions through the inversion of their order (*Assembly of Idiots*); the exploration of the resistive and emancipatory potential inherent to the arts (*Doing Assembly*); and "hauntology"—the integration of those who are no longer or do not yet exist within the living political present (*Assembly of Phantoms*). These three positions will not be treated as self-contained sections but instead form the more or less tangible, overlapping undertones of the Bergen Assembly 2019. They function as open figures of thought that are inscribed into the different levels of the project in symbolic, imaginary and concrete ways.

FIGURES OF THOUGHT

ASSEMBLY OF IDIOTS

The word "idiot" derives from the Greek *idiōtēs*, which can be translated as "private person" or "layperson." In the Greek polis, the *idiōtēs* were originally citizens interested in politics and who spoke in the assembly and courts on their own initiative.[1] Later they were replaced and silenced by the rhetor, the professional speaker. Forced into the role of the laypeople, they retreated to the private sphere. An Assembly of Idiots suspends the model of the political assembly in which the right to speak is hierarchized and delegated to professionals. It is an assembly of those whose concerns are regarded as non-political, that is, not of public interest. These are people who move on the margins of the political community.

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[1] See Lene Rubinstein, *The Athenian Political Perception of the Idiotes*, in Paul Cartledge et al., eds., *Kosmos: Essays in Order, Conflict and Community in Classical Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

An *Assembly of Idiots* parodies political institutions by breaking open, inverting and changing their structures of order. Conversely, the question is raised as to what extent existing political institutions themselves—from the parliament to the construction of the nation-state and transnational political structures—can be described as parodies.

DOING ASSEMBLY

Parody, understood as something that is able to change—to repeat and alter, double and distort—what it parodies, might be a central element of all emancipatory action. In this sense, parody would be at the core of a *Doing Assembly* that aims both to shape alternative spaces for political action and to change the existing conditions through the means, methods and experiences specific to art, theory and activism. How can the knowledge and experience of resistance and emancipation be shared among different social discourses, contexts and realities? What languages, tools and methods are available for achieving this, and what conceivable alliances can be formed in the process? Any *Doing Assembly* concerns, in a very specific way, the questions of *how*, *in what form* and *with whom* we imagine political action.

ASSEMBLY OF PHANTOMS

> *When solidarity among the living exhibits cracks,*
> *then we are dependent on the solidarity of the dead.*
> Alexander Kluge (with Heiner Müller)

Important allies in the process of emancipation and the struggle for justice are those who no longer or do not yet exist: the "not presently living" (Jacques Derrida) to which an *Assembly of Phantoms* is dedicated. As the German writer and filmmaker Alexander Kluge says (in dialogue with German dramatist Heiner Müller's spirit), it is a mistake to think that the dead are dead. He proposes listening and talking to them, sharing their experiences: for example in regards to long gone, buried and unused moments of possible emancipation that enable the imagination of another present and future.

In his "hauntology" (*Spectres of Marx*, 1993), the French philosopher Jacques Derrida argues for a "being-with the not presently living": a being-with the spectre, which adheres to a different temporality, a "non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present". It is about the recognition of and responsibility to the past (no longer) and the future (not yet) – as precondition for a more just world. For Derrida, this justice-to-come (*a-venir*) lies in the permanent breaking open and changing of the existing order, that is, in a genuinely parodic act.

ACTUALLY, THE DEAD ARE NOT DEAD

The Bergen Assembly 2019 titled *Actually, the Dead Are Not Dead* addresses the spectre, a "being-with" the not presently living (Derrida). This attention to the dead—to our responsibility toward those who are not longer or not yet here—is also understood as an act of rejecting reigning necropolitical conditions: the subjugation of life to the power of death (Achille Mbembe).

Necropolitics deny the past and the future. They destroy the material basis of life for large portions of the population, approving and taking into account the physical and social death of workers, the poor and refugees. They hazard the survival of the planet, involving wars and weapons of mass destruction; the acceptance of the physical and social death of workers, the poor and refugees as well as violence against "other bodies." They form the roots of slavery and colonialism: the basis of Western capitalism. Necropolitics are behind the many lives that do not count and the deaths that are not mourned, those whom Judith Butler calls the *ungrievable* and Mbembe the *living dead*. How to mourn collectively for the ungrievable? Mourning in Western

cultures has the function of ensuring that the dead do not return. In contrast, *Actually, the Dead Are Not Dead* calls for a form of mourning that evokes the return of these dead: for the sake of life.

STRUCTURES

The programme of the Bergen Assembly 2019 is conceived by the members of the core group in the form of individual, shared and overlapping projects to which additional artists and contributors from other fields are invited. Working together with local groups and individuals is crucial. The projects include formats such as workshops, "parliaments" and "general assemblies", performances and a major exhibition. They take place at different times and locations in Bergen addressing different audiences. The overall programme is drafted as a series of constellations whose individual elements do not adhere to an overarching holistic concept but rather obtain their form and meaning from the reciprocal relationships of attraction and repulsion.[2]

To a certain extent, existing projects have been adopted for *Actually, the Dead Are Not Dead*, projects that have a unique character precisely because they continue and develop in different contexts of time and place. These are projects based on far-ranging experiences of cooperation with local and international activists, groups and communities and/or are long-term projects in the field of artistic research.

The programme of the Bergen Assembly 2019 as a whole is intended as a fabric of diverse temporalities and rhythms, scenes and formats, nodes and (thematic) trajectories—full of rifts and returns, density and dispersion, visibilities and invisibilities.

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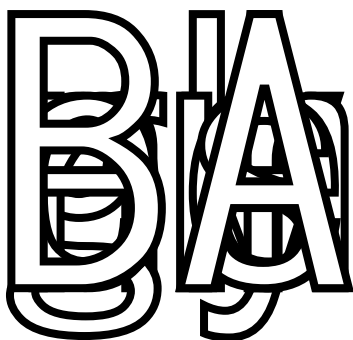
[2] See Alexander Kluge's conception of "constellation" for example in Alexander Kluge, *Der Autor als Dompteur oder Gärtner: Rede zum Heinrich-Böll-Preis*, in idem, *Personen und Reden* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2012), 411.